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Modal Panentheism

Yujin Nagasawa

“What could be more stupid than to deny that supreme excellence to that universal nature which embraces all things?”—Cicero

1. Introduction

Modal panentheism consists primarily of the following two theses:

- (1) God is the totality of all possible worlds.
- (2) All possible worlds exist to the same extent that the actual world does.

As I explain in detail below, the first thesis can be construed as a version of pantheism or panentheism depending on how we understand the ontological status of possible worlds. The second thesis is what metaphysicians call modal realism.¹ It says that the actual world is not the only possible world that exists; all possible worlds exist and they are as real as the actual world. So modal panentheism says that all possible worlds exist and God is the totality of those worlds.

The aim of this paper is to consider modal panentheism as an alternative to traditional theism. In Section 2, I argue that we can derive modal panentheism—perhaps counterintuitively—from the Anselmian definition of God, which is widely accepted among traditional theists. In Section 3, I argue that the modal panentheistic God shares many specific great-making properties that are commonly ascribed to God by traditional theists. Such properties include omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, immutability, impassibility, eternity, necessary existence, omnipresence, independence, unsurpassability, and the property of being a cause of the universe.² In Section 4, I argue that modal panentheism provides compelling answers to many difficult problems in the philosophy of religion, such as the problem of evil, the problem of no best possible world, the fine-tuning problem, the timing problem for the beginning of the universe, and the question why there is anything rather than nothing. However, I argue in Section 5 that there is a variation of the problem of evil for modal panentheism which is difficult to resolve. Section 6 concludes.

2. The Anselmian Definition of God

Traditional theism so-called is shared across the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. It is widely agreed that traditional theism is based on the definition of God (or a close variant thereof) introduced or anticipated by Anselm in the eleventh century:

¹ Modal realism is most notably defended by David Lewis (1986).

² The ascriptions of these attributes to God are matters of dispute. For example, it is disputed whether or not God is eternal. Some claim that God’s relationship with time should rather be understood as timelessness or omnitemporality. I set these disputes aside in this paper.

(3) God is that than which no greater can be thought.

Anselm famously uses this definition to construct the ontological argument for the existence of God (Anselm, originally 1077–1078, 1979).

How does traditional theism interpret the above definition? More specifically, how does it interpret the notion of greatness in the definition? Harwood presents the most common interpretation as follows: God (or the Maximally Great Being, as Harwood calls it) ‘is one that has all possible positive qualities to the highest possible extent and is totally devoid of negative qualities’ (Harwood 1999, p. 478). So, for example, if knowledge, power and benevolence are positive qualities (or great-making properties) while ignorance, vulnerability and malevolence are negative qualities (or worse-making properties), then God has knowledge, power and benevolence to the highest possible extent while totally lacking ignorance, vulnerability and malevolence.³ Based on this interpretation traditional theism typically holds that God is an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, immutable, impassible, eternal, necessarily existent, omnipresent, independent, unsurpassable, personal cause of the universe.⁴

Modal pantheism appears to differ radically from traditional theism, where the nature of God is at stake. Surprisingly enough, however, we can also derive modal pantheism from the Anselmian definition of God, albeit based on an alternative interpretation of that definition according to which greatness in the definition of God should be understood not in terms of the extent of positivity or great-making there is but in terms of the scope of that which it encompasses. So, on this interpretation, the more encompassing a being is the higher the greatness of that being is. It is easily overlooked but pantheists and panentheists often understand God’s greatness in this way. God’s complete comprehensiveness, its capacity to encompass all of reality, represents God’s ultimate significance. God is the greatest being, according to this understanding, because God encompasses absolutely everything and there is nothing beyond it. Balbus, Cicero’s character in *The Nature of Gods* who defends Stoic pantheism says, for example, “What could be more stupid than to deny that supreme excellence to that universal nature which embraces all things?” (Cicero, originally 45 BC, 1972, p. 137)⁵. According to this understanding, God, as that than which no

³ I use the term ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ to refer to God throughout this paper because our main focus is on modal pantheism, which does not regard God as a person or personal being.

⁴ There is a debate about whether or not God, or any being, can simultaneously have multiple great-making properties to the highest possible extent. Some people claim, for example, that it is impossible for God (or any other being) to be all-knowing and all-powerful simultaneously. I set this debate aside in this paper. See Nagasawa (2008).

⁵ An anonymous referee doubts that this quote from Cicero supports the construal of greatness in terms of encompassment. The referee contends that Balbus says only that there is something which encompasses all things and it would be foolish not to call that thing great. According to the referee, that is not the same as saying that it is great *because* it encompasses all things.

However, if encompassment has nothing to do with greatness, it is puzzling why Bulbus uses the phrase ‘that universal nature which embraces all things’ rather

greater can be thought, is the maximally encompassing being. And modal panentheism holds that such a being is the totality of all possible worlds as it encompasses everything.

Suppose now that modal actualism is true, that is, only the actual world exists. In this case, insofar as existing things are concerned, the ‘totality of all possible worlds including the actual world’ is equivalent to the actual world alone because, according to modal actualism, everything that exists is actual and no merely possible worlds exist. This means that modal actualism and the thesis that God is the totality of all possible worlds jointly entail pantheism, according to which God is identical with the actual world.

Modal panentheism says, on the other hand, that modal realism (i.e., thesis 2 above) is true; that is, all possible worlds exist to the same extent that the actual world does. According to modal realism, actuality is merely indexical. There is no ontological difference between the actual world and other possible worlds. The actual world is special for us merely because it is *our* world, just as some other possible world is special for the inhabitants of that world. All possible worlds are ontologically on a par although they are causally isolated from one another.⁶ Given modal realism, the totality of all possible worlds including the actual world is more encompassing than the actual world alone is. Modal panentheism is a version of panentheism rather than pantheism because it entails existence beyond the actual world which we inhabit, namely, other possible worlds. That is, the actual world is only a proper part of God. (Having said that, I hasten to add that modal panentheism can be construed as a version of pantheism if we define pantheism as the view that God is identical with reality or the sum of all there is, rather than only the actual world which we inhabit. Ultimately, therefore, it is a matter of definition whether modal panentheism is a version of pantheism or panentheism.)

Pantheism is known to face the problem of unity: How can we consider the world a single unified entity given that it consists of uncountably many individual objects? Modal panentheism faces a parallel problem: How can we consider the totality of all possible worlds a single unified entity given that it consists of uncountably many individual objects? Pantheists typically appeal to causal links or the laws of nature to explain the unity, but modal panentheists may be able to maintain a stronger unity by appealing to a unity that is based on modality. If our world is a four-dimensional

than simply ‘that universal nature’. The quote in question follows this passage, which I think supports my construal:

The various creatures of the universe may meet with many external obstacles to their perfect development. But no obstacle can frustrate the development of the universe itself. The universe moulds and *embraces all things*. Therefore, we must admit the existence of that forth and final stage of being, which no power can assail. This is the stage of being on which the whole of nature depends. It is thus above all things and nothing has any power against it, and is the universal dwelling-place of reason and of wisdom”. (Cicero, originally 45 BC, 1972, p. 137, emphasis added)

In any case, whether or not my interpretation of Cicero is correct, it is quite common for pantheists and panentheists to construe God’s greatness in terms of encompassment.

⁶ Modal possibilism says that some existent things are in the actual world and some other existent things are not in the actual world. Modal realism is an extreme form of modal possibilism.

object consisting of space and time, then perhaps the totality of all possible worlds is equivalent to logical space or a five-dimensional object consisting of space, time and modality. God, according to this view, is the most encompassing being because it extends maximally in space, time and modality. Nothing can extend further than such a being.

Defending modal realism itself is outside the scope of this paper. However, one strategy that could motivate modal realism in this context would be to construct an argument similar to the ontological argument: That than which no greater can be thought is, according to modal panentheism, the totality of all possible worlds. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that some of the worlds in the totality of all possible worlds do not exist. It then follows that another totality can be thought that is greater than the totality of all possible worlds. Such a totality is thought to encompass all possible worlds and all of these worlds are thought to exist. However, it is contradictory to say that a being can be thought that is greater than the totality of all possible worlds because the totality of all possible worlds is, by definition, that than which no greater can be thought. Hence, it is impossible that some of the worlds in the totality of all possible worlds do not exist. Therefore, all possible worlds in the totality of all possible worlds exist. Therefore, modal realism is true.⁷

I am aware that many, especially those who are critical of the ontological argument, would not find the above argument compelling. However, in this paper I will not discuss the soundness of the above argument or any other argument for modal realism. Instead, I try to motivate modal realism indirectly by showing how modal panentheism, which is based on modal realism, can solve a number of central problems in the philosophy of religion.

3. Great-Making Properties

We have seen that despite its uniqueness modal panentheism is, just like traditional theism, derived from the Anselmian definition of God as that than which no greater can be thought. Nevertheless, it still appears that modal panentheism differs radically from traditional theism. As we have seen, while traditional theism regards God as the being that has all possible positive qualities to the greatest possible extent, modal panentheism regards God as the totality of all possible worlds. I maintain, however, that the modal panentheistic God at least in some sense shares several properties with the traditional theistic God.⁸ Such properties include omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, immutability, impassibility, eternity, necessary existence, omnipresence, independence, unsurpassability, and the property of being a cause of the universe.

According to modal panentheism, God is the totality of all possible worlds, a being that encompasses all possible states of affairs and, moreover, all such possible worlds are real. This means that all possible instances of knowledge, power, and

⁷ The fact that we can construct a version of the ontological argument for modal realism/modal panentheism supports the point that the modal panentheistic concept of God is structurally parallel to the traditional theistic concept of God despite the fact that these concepts are based on distinct interpretations of God's greatness. If however one is antecedently sceptical of modal realism, then the observation that we can construct a version of the ontological argument for modal realism/modal panentheism makes such a sceptic question modal realism even further. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

⁸ Oppy (1997) and Steinhardt (2004) make similar points.

benevolence are real and encompassed by God. This implies that, at least in one sense, the modal panentheistic God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent.⁹ (One might claim that the modal panentheistic God cannot be omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent because although it encompasses all possible forms of knowledge, power, and benevolence it also encompasses all possible forms of ignorance, weakness and malevolence. Here is a possible response to such a claim: Consider, as a parallel example, a group of three people A, B and C. A knows x and y, B knows z, and C is totally ignorant. In this scenario, we are inclined to say that the group as a whole knows x, y and z and that the ignorance of C does not cancel out what A and B know. Similarly, the ignorance/weakness of an individual does not seem to undermine the knowledge/power of the totality to which the individual belongs. Omnibenevolence is more difficult to address but perhaps the same reasoning applies if Aquinas is right in saying that to sin is merely to fall short of a perfect action.¹⁰)

Also, since the totality of all possible worlds is equivalent to logical space the modal panentheistic God is immutable, impassible, eternal and necessarily existent. The modal panentheistic God is also omnipresent and eternal in the sense that it encompasses all spatiotemporal locations in all possible worlds.¹¹ The modal panentheistic God is also independent because, as the totality of all possible worlds, its existence does not rely ontologically on any other existents. In fact, there is nothing external to God as there is nothing outside the totality of all possible worlds. The modal panentheistic God is also unsurpassable since there cannot be anything greater than the totality of all possible worlds; the totality of all possible worlds is the most encompassing being possible. Furthermore, the totality of all possible worlds can even be seen as a cause of the universe. A necessary being is commonly understood as a self-caused being that does not require any external cause of its existence. Since God, as the totality of all possible worlds, is a necessary being it is also a self-caused being. Now the totality here is assumed to encompass everything, including the universe. This means that, in one sense, the modal panentheistic God is a cause of the universe as well.

⁹ Notice that, if pantheism is true, God encompasses only all pieces of knowledge that *exist in the actual world*, all powers that *exist in the actual world*, and all forms of benevolence that *exist in the actual world*. This hardly entails that God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent.

¹⁰ There is a further question about the possession of knowledge, power and benevolence by the modal panentheistic God. It is assumed here that the modal panentheistic God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent because it subsumes all possible forms of knowledge, power and benevolence possessed by individuals. One might say, however, that this is an instance of the fallacy of composition because it is assumed erroneously here that if an individual has certain properties, the whole, which encompasses them, has these properties as well (thanks to Klaas Kraay for this perspective on this point). I do not have space to discuss this criticism in detail here but I believe that modal panentheists can respond to it. For example, they can appeal to the fact that we commonly attribute collective knowledge, collective power and collective morality (if not benevolence) to a group of people, such as a company.

¹¹ This of course does not mean that the modal panentheistic God is omnipresent and eternal in exactly the same sense in which the traditional theistic God is. In particular, modal panentheism does not entail that God is wholly present everywhere, undivided in His being.

Perhaps the only prominent properties of the traditional theistic God that the modal panentheistic God lacks are the property of being a person and the property of having free will. Traditional theism normally says that God is a person with free will. Modal panentheism does not ascribe such a property to God even though it entails that God encompasses all possible persons and all beings with free will. In this sense, perhaps God is a partially personal being or a partially free being even though it is not a free person in itself. In order to ascribe freedom and personhood to a thing there has to be an appropriate bearer of these properties. However, the totality of all possible worlds does not seem to qualify as a bearer of such properties.

Nonetheless, as we have seen, the modal panentheistic God at least in some sense shares many properties with the traditional theistic God. It seems reasonable, therefore, to view modal panentheism as a form of theism, although ultimately, of course, it is a matter of definition whether or not any given view can be seen as a form of theism.

4. Modal Panentheism and Problems in the Philosophy of Religion

One of the main reasons to prefer modal panentheism to traditional theism is that it offers answers to many difficult problems in the philosophy of religion, answers that are not available to traditional theism. Such problems include the problem of evil, the problem of no best possible world, the fine-tuning problem, the timing problem for the beginning of the universe, and the question why there is anything at all.

Consider the problem of evil first:

The Problem of Evil: If an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists the actual world has to be free from evil. However, there certainly is evil in the actual world. Therefore, God does not exist.¹²

Modal panentheism can quickly dismiss this problem. A hidden assumption in the above-stated version of the problem is that God is, if it exists at all, a being that would, given its omnipotence, omnibenevolence and free will, eliminate evil. Modal panentheism simply rejects this assumption by saying that it is a mistake to think that God is a being who performs morally significant actions using free will. God is, according to modal panentheism, the totality of all possible worlds and not a being with free will. This response is, however, not very interesting because it does not explain why there has to be evil in the first place.

Modal panentheism explains the existence of evil as follows: Again, given modal realism all possible worlds exist. This means that every single possible state of affairs is instantiated. Many states of affairs that include evil—states of affairs which include instances of moral evil such as murders, rapes, terrorism, and slavery, and instances of natural evil such as disasters and catastrophes caused by earthquakes, tornados, floods and droughts—are metaphysically possible. If so, it is unavoidable that evil is instantiated. In sum, once we accept modal realism, it is necessarily the case that there is evil.

But why does there have to be evil in the actual world instead of some other possible world? Why do *we* in the actual world have to suffer? Modal panentheism responds to these questions by saying that there is no reason that the actual world, instead of some other possible world, has to be free from evil. Modal realism does not

¹² See Adams and Adams (1990), Peterson (1992), Plantinga (1974), and Rowe (2001).

privilege the actual world over other possible worlds. As we saw earlier, according to modal realism, actuality, which distinguishes the actual world from other possible worlds, is nothing but indexicality. That is, the actual world appears ontologically special to us merely because *we* happen to exist in the actual world. However, counterparts to us exist in other possible worlds similar to the actual world. If we do not suffer from evil, then our counterparts, who are as real as we are, must suffer from evil in their worlds. Given that we and our counterparts are morally equivalent, there is no reason for them to suffer instead of us, and vice versa. As Michael Almeida says, this is comparable to a situation in which a rescuer can save each of two persons but not both of them (Almeida 2011, p. 9). In such a situation, it is not legitimate to ask why person *x* rather than person *y* had to be rescued. Similarly, it is not legitimate to ask why the actual world rather than some other possible world has to contain evil.

We can apply the same reasoning to many other problems in the philosophy of religion. Consider, for example, the following:

The Problem of No Best Possible World: If there is an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God, then the actual world has to be the best possible world. However, the actual world certainly is not the best possible world. Therefore, God does not exist.¹³

Notice how this problem differs from the problem of evil. The problem of no best possible world is not necessarily concerned with the existence of evil in the actual world. In fact, the problem would remain even if the actual world had been completely free from evil, as long as the actual world is not the best possible world. Leibniz famously bites the bullet and responds to the problem by saying that the actual world *is* the best possible world. However, most people disagree with him; it is easy to conceive of a possible world that is better than the actual world. For example, we can conceive of a world identical to the actual world except that a certain minor mishap in the actual world does not take place in that world. Modal panentheism responds to the problem of no best possible world in the same manner in which it responds to the problem of evil: (i) It is wrong to assume that God is a being with free will that would, given its omnipotence and omnibenevolence, create the best possible world; (ii) there exist worlds like the actual world that are not the greatest possible because all possible worlds exist; (iii) there is no reason to think that the actual world, instead of some other possible world, has to be the best possible world as all possible worlds are ontologically on a par.

The problem of evil and the problem of no best possible world raise primarily moral concerns. They ask how an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God could be morally justified in creating the actual world given certain observed conditions of that world. Yet modal panentheism can also respond to problems that raise purely metaphysical concerns regarding the nature of our universe:

The Fine-Tuning Problem: Some philosophers and scientists claim that the existence of life is grounded on an extremely delicate balance of initial conditions that obtained at the beginning of the universe. For example, Stephen Hawking estimates that if the rate of the universe's expansion one second after the big bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, life could not have existed in the universe (Craig and

¹³ See Adams (1972), Kraay (2008), Langtry (2008) and Rowe (2004).

Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, p. 9). However, life does exist in the universe, which appears miraculous.¹⁴

The Timing Problem for the Beginning of the Universe: According to scientists, the universe is approximately 15 billion years old. Why did the universe have to begin to exist 15 billion years ago? Whether the universe is created by God or through a natural process the age of the universe seems to be completely arbitrary.¹⁵

The Problem of Why There is Anything at All: As J. J. C. Smart says, ‘That anything exists at all does seem . . . a matter for the deepest awe’ (Smart 1955, p. 194). Biology might explain why there are animals and plants, and cosmology might explain why there are planets and galaxies. However, why there is anything at all rather than nothing is the deepest metaphysical mystery that no one seems able to answer.¹⁶

The fine-tuning problem might not arise if, as the multiverse hypothesis says, there are infinitely many universes in the actual world. However, even if there can be only one universe in each possible world, this problem does not arise for modal panentheism. This is because modal panentheism can still allow infinitely many universes by letting each possible world in the totality of all possible worlds (i.e., infinitely many possible worlds) contain one universe. Modal panentheism says that it is not surprising that there is a fine-tuned universe because there are infinitely many universes subject to infinitely many conditions across possible worlds. Why the actual world contains a fine-tuned universe is not a question for modal panentheism because, again, modal realism does not discriminate among possible worlds.

In response to the timing problem modal panentheism says that there are, in the totality of all possible worlds, infinitely many universes of an infinite variety of ages, and our 15-billion-year-old universe is only one of them. It is not surprising that there is a universe that is 15 billion years old because, given modal realism, some world has to contain such a universe. Why the actual world has to contain such a universe is not a legitimate question because, again, the actual world and other possible worlds are ontologically on a par.

The question why there is anything at all might not arise if there cannot be an empty world.¹⁷ However, even if there can be an empty world, this problem does not arise for modal panentheism. It just happens to be the case that the actual world is not an empty world. There is no reason to think that the actual world, instead of some other possible world, has to be empty.

Notice that each of the problems that we have seen focuses on a ‘mystery’ concerning a specific condition of the actual world that appears incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God or that, by itself, appears totally arbitrary or probabilistically/metaphysically unlikely to obtain. The problem of evil asks why there is evil in the actual world given the existence of an omnipotent and

¹⁴ See also, Barrow and Tipler (1988), Carr (2007), and Leslie (1996).

¹⁵ See Leftow (1991). G. W. Leibniz also addresses the question ‘Why didn’t God create everything a year sooner than he did?’ in his exchange with Samuel Clark in 1716.

¹⁶ See Goldschmidt (2013), Kuhn (2007), Leslie and Kuhn (2013) and Rundle (2004).

¹⁷ See Baldwin (1996), Efid and Stoneham (2005), and van Inwagen (1996).

omnibenevolent God. The problem of no best possible world asks why the actual world is not the best possible world given the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. The fine-tuning problem asks why the actual world has to contain a universe that is fine-tuned when it is probabilistically very unlikely. The timing problem asks why the actual world has to contain a universe that is 15 billion years old, which seems arbitrary. The question why there is anything at all asks why there is something rather than nothing in the actual world, which seems metaphysically unlikely.

Modal panentheism can respond to any problem within the same logical structure. It says that all possible worlds exist and are equally real, so there is no special reason that the actual world—that is, one of infinitely many possible worlds—has a specific condition. If we consider the converse of this point we can derive an interesting conclusion: *all of these ‘mysteries’ arise because we assume erroneously that the actual world is the only possible world that exists.* Once we give up such an assumption these mysteries disappear.

5. The Problem of Evil for Modal Panentheism

In the previous section, I argued that the problem of evil is among problems in the philosophy of religion that modal panentheism can resolve. Accordingly I have shown that the following three questions do not raise serious concerns for modal panentheism:

Q1: Why is there evil given the existence of God as an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent free being?

Q2: Why is there evil at all?

Q3: Why is there evil in the actual world, i.e., *our* world?

First, Q1 cannot be directed against modal panentheism. This is because Q1 is based on an assumption that modal panentheism rejects, namely, the assumption that God is a being that can freely choose to eliminate evil. Second, modal panentheism successfully responds to Q2 by saying that every single possible state of affairs is instantiated in the totality of all possible worlds, which is, according to modal panentheism, identical with God. Given that it is possible for evil states of affairs to be instantiated, it is not a surprise that they are instantiated in the totality. Third, Q3 is not a legitimate question for modal panentheism because, according to modal panentheism, all possible worlds are ontologically on a par. Since the actual world is by no means privileged it is not a question why *our* world, rather than some other possible world, includes evil.

It is a great strength of modal panentheism in contrast to traditional theism that it can offer straightforward answers to the above questions concerning evil. However, ironically, modal panentheism faces a different form of the problem of evil because of its own unique feature. In what follows, I argue that this problem raises a serious challenge for modal panentheism.

The problem that modal panentheism faces is a variation of the following problem that *pantheism* faces:

The Problem of Evil for Pantheism: Pantheism says that God is identical with the actual world. However, there certainly is evil in the actual world and God is not an evil being. Therefore, pantheism is false.

The actual world includes many awful instances of moral and natural evil. Pantheism has to say that these instances are part of God and yet it is difficult to regard anything that includes instances of evil to be God. This problem is based on the following question:

Q4: Why is there evil in the world if God is identical with the world?

This question is distinct from Q1, Q2 and Q3 as it is directed specifically to pantheism. The problem of evil for pantheism is powerful because pantheists cannot undercut it by making typical moves that traditional theists make in response to the problem of evil. For example, pantheists cannot appeal to the free will theodicy by saying that God is not responsible for evil because evil is caused by free humans. This is because even if evil is caused by free humans pantheists still have to hold that free humans themselves are part of God. Whatever free humans do is, according to pantheism, part of God. Neither can they appeal to the soul-making theodicy by saying that evil is necessary for the spiritual growth of humans beyond their physical existence. This is because pantheism holds that there is no reality beyond the physical reality that humans inhabit. Neither can they appeal to sceptical theism by saying that, while our epistemic limitations do not allow us to fully comprehend God's reason, evil is necessary in God's grand scheme beyond the natural world. This is because pantheism is not compatible with the existence of a God that has a grand scheme beyond the physical reality.

The bad news for modal panentheism is that the problem of evil for pantheism intensifies when it is applied to modal panentheism.

The Problem of Evil for Modal Panentheism: Modal panentheism says that God is identical with the totality of all possible worlds. However, the totality of all possible worlds includes all possible instances of evil, including the very worst possible instances of evil, and God is not an evil being. Therefore, modal panentheism is false.

This problem is based on the following question:

Q5: Why are there the worst possible instances of evil in the totality of all possible worlds if God is identical with it?

This question is distinct from Q1–Q4 above as it is directed specifically to modal panentheism. We have seen that pantheists cannot undercut Q4 by making moves that traditional theists typically make in response to the problem of evil, and neither can modal panentheists undercut Q5 by making such moves.

The problem of evil for modal panentheism is more intractable than the problem of evil for pantheism. While pantheism entails only the thesis that all *actual* instances of evil (i.e., all instances of evil in the actual world) are part of God, modal panentheism entails the much stronger thesis that all *possible* instances of evil (i.e., all instances of evil in all possible worlds), including the very worst possible instances of evil, are part of God. This means that modal panentheism entails that there is, as part

of God, a state of affairs in which, for example, millions of innocent children are tortured for an extended period, possibly eternally, for no reason.¹⁸

Again, modal panentheism adopts the interpretation of God's greatness that is not based on the degree of positivity or great-making but on the scope of that which it encompasses. Hence, according to modal panentheism, the more encompassing a being is the higher the greatness of that being is. The amount of evil that God subsumes therefore actually enhances, rather than diminishes, the greatness of God.

Conversely, if God fails to encompass some evil state of affairs (or any state of affairs at all) it fails to qualify as the greatest possible being on this interpretation. However, it is highly counterintuitive to think that utterly awful states of affairs are part of God if God is worthy of religious veneration. What this observation seems to teach us is that it is not correct to interpret God's greatness in terms of encompassment. While modal realism might not be an incoherent metaphysical view and it depends on one's definition of God whether the totality of all possible worlds is identified with God according to modal realism, such a definition entails disturbing moral implications which are difficult to accept.

One might think that we can solve this problem by appealing to Lewis's defence of modal realism. Modal realism faces a moral problem that is related to the problem of evil for modal panentheism. The moral problem for modal realism is this: Given the claim of modal realism that all possible worlds exist, the total amount of good and evil does not change whether or not we act morally in the actual world. Whether or not we act morally to prevent and eliminate evil in the actual world, the same evil is instantiated in some other possible world anyway. Therefore, modal realism appears to discourage us from acting morally.

Lewis's response to this problem is that evil events in other possible worlds should not be our moral concern. He writes:

For those of us who think of morality in terms of virtue and honour, desert and respect and esteem, loyalties and affections and solidarity, the other-worldly evils should not seem even momentarily relevant to morality. Of course our moral aims are egocentric. And likewise all the more for those who think of morality in terms of rules, rights, and duties; or as obedience to the will of God (Lewis 1986, p. 127).¹⁹

One might try to apply similar reasoning to the problem of evil for modal panentheism and maintain that we should not be bothered that there are utterly awful evil states of affairs in worlds other than the actual world. When we talk about what is good and what is evil, one might say, our main concern is what is good and what is evil in *our* world and our moral concerns should not extend to other possible worlds that are causally and spatiotemporally isolated from the actual world. And, given the laws of nature and other contingent facts, evil that can be instantiated in the actual world is only finite in quality and quantity. However, such a response does not succeed in saving modal panentheism. Lewis might be right in saying that we should

¹⁸ An anonymous referee says that it is not clear how the problem of evil intensifies for modal panentheism because the amount of evil that occurs is irrelevant to the difficulty or seriousness of the problem. I agree with the referee that a single instance of evil is sufficient to formulate the problem of evil, but the problem *is* strengthened significantly if all possible instances of evil, including the very worst possible instances of evil, are obtained. That would constitute the quantitatively and qualitatively most significant form of the problem of horrendous evil (Adams 1999).

¹⁹ For the moral implications of modal realism see Adams (1979) and Heller (2003).

not be bothered by evil in other possible worlds when considering the moral significance of actions in our own world. That is, even though the total axiological value and the total amount of good and evil in the sum of all possible worlds do not change whatever action we perform, we should not be discouraged from acting morally in the actual world. Yet this does not entail that we should not be bothered by evil in other possible worlds in relation to the thesis that the totality of all possible worlds is identical with God. The adoption of an egocentric point of view allows us to set aside other possible worlds *in considering our moral actions* but it does not allow us to set aside other possible worlds *in considering the totality of all possible worlds identified as God*. It is still puzzling how the totality of all possible worlds could be worthy of religious veneration if it includes so much evil.

The problem of evil for modal panentheism is intractable. It seems more intractable than any other forms of the problem of evil, as it involves, quantitatively and qualitatively, the most significant instances of evil, which exist, according to modal panentheism, as part of God.

6. Conclusion

Modal panentheism offers a unique alternative to the traditional concept of God. It coheres with the Anselmian definition of God as that than which no greater can be thought (at least on a certain interpretation) and preserves some of the great-making properties that are commonly ascribed to God (again, at least on a certain interpretation). It also offers answers to many fundamental problems in the philosophy of religion and shows that apparent mysteries on which these problems are based are not actually mysteries. However, it faces its own problem. The problem of evil is widely recognised as one of the most difficult challenges to traditional theism but a variation of the problem that modal panentheism faces seems to be even more difficult.²⁰

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²⁰ I would like to thank Andrei Buckareff, Klaas Kraay, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, Eric Steinhart and two anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I discuss 'multiverse pantheism', which is closely related to modal panentheism, in my earlier paper (Nagasawa 2015). I presented that paper at a workshop at Ryerson University in February 2013. I would like to thank the workshop organisers and participants, as the current paper also benefited from discussions that took place at that event. This paper was written as part of my Templeton project with Buckareff, 'Exploring Alternative Concepts of God'. I am very grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for their generous support.

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